



Cory's Salvation

Shara Azod

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PROLOGUE

Cory Booker walked slowly out of the doctor's office in a daze. The shot the doctor had given him effectively blocked the pain for now. His fist clutched the prescription for more medication; the medicine that would ensure he could go about his daily routine. Too bad the pills would do nothing for his career. That part of his life was over. Never again would he hear the roar of the crowd when he not only held on for eight seconds, but looked for all the world like he was orchestrating the bull's movement. It had been a beautiful gift, to look as if his spine could curve with beauty and grace in time with the bull's bucking. He supposed he should be grateful that he won enough money to purchase the spread he had always wanted and to keep him and several horses reasonably fed. Actually, he had saved more than a pretty penny. There was a place in Lockport, Illinois he had his eye on. Maybe he would make an offer. He could get some more horses, maybe give lessons or break horses. Probably not break them, but he could board and exercise them.

Climbing into the cab of his truck, Cory leaned his head heavily on the steering wheel. Damn, he was only twenty-nine! He thought he had a few good

years left, but now it was all over. The doctor had warned him one more bull or bronco ride could permanently disable him. At first, Cory had taken heart in the “could,” but then the doctor went on to explain there was no way of knowing for sure. If he got up for one more ride, he might not be able to climb down. Cory had seen other riders who had refused to quit long after it was time. Those who could walk usually did so in tremendous pain, twisted and bent, old before their time. Most didn’t have anyone to care for them, retiring in filthy, broken down mobile homes. There were plenty of former riders with permanent places at bar stools, recounting their glory days to anyone who would listen. Like his father. Cory refused to be one of those men.

I can still rope, Cory told himself, trying to dispel the heavy weight that had settled on him like a blanket, threatening to smother him. Even as he clicked off the list in his head he knew he was done. He had made a name for himself bronc riding. Bareback or saddle, it didn’t matter; there wasn’t a bronc out there he couldn’t ride. He had started out as a snot-nosed brat, trick riding, much to the dismay of his mother. After high school graduation at seventeen, he had joined his father on the road. He had gone from trick riding, to roping, to bull dogging before finding his true calling: bronc riding. When not riding the circuit, he had helped his father break in rich people’s horses. It had been good money, but his father couldn’t seem to keep any of it. By the time Cory was twenty, he had learned to

hide what he earned. He even started taking correspondence courses with the aim to one day own his own horse ranch. He had finally graduated online with a Bachelor's in Agronomy and then attended college full time between seasons to earn a Master's in Agribusiness.

Still, he was not ready to settle down yet. The degrees had been a precaution, something to fall back on when he grew too old to ride. He had planned on stopping at thirty-five maybe. He had never expected to be told he had to stop or risk the possibility of never walking again. It was a tough pill to swallow. Starting the truck, Cory made his way slowly to the interstate, ignoring the beeps and yelled words from other motorists with some place to go. He had no idea where he was going; he didn't really care.

CHAPTER ONE

“Pop! Pop!”

Dwayne Booker opened one bleary eye at the imposing figure standing by his bed. His son stood about six feet three inches, four full inches taller than himself. He was lean but cut; his chest and arms straining the plain blue t-shirt. His faded denim jeans rode low on his hips. Dwayne had heard how the women in town talked about his son. “*Sexy as the devil, but colder than a blizzard.*” What the boy needed was a good woman to soften him around the edges and give him a bit of peace. Cory was pushing thirty-three and as far as Dwayne could tell, didn’t date, didn’t fool around. The boy’s entire life revolved around his damn ranch. Seems Cory had left all the laughter and joy in his life back on the rodeo circuit.

“Damn boy, why are you waking me up?” Dwayne demanded. Though the sun was shining through the window, he refused to believe it was any later than seven, maybe eight. It was Sunday. Couldn’t a tired soul sleep in a little on Sunday?

“It’s ten o’clock,” Cory grumbled. “You missed the morning feeding and breakfast.”

“Trey’s s’posed to feed the damn horses in the morning,” Dwayne grumbled pulling the covers up over his head. “And it’s Sunday. Ain’t breakfast s’posed to be brunch on Sundays?”

Cory shook his head as he snatched the covers from around his father. He had hoped giving Dwayne a nice home where he could do the only thing he was really any good at would settle his father. It hadn’t. Dwayne still went into town every night returning in the wee hours stinking drunk. It hadn’t been so bad when they had Trey, a gangly sixteen-year-old that had grown up around horses to help out. But Trey had quit a week ago, preferring to hang out with friends his age who thought being a cowboy was for losers. More and more kids were turning away from working on any kind of ranch or farm in favor of city life. They had no idea as to the rich heritage of the American cowboy. It was sad. Sometimes Cory felt as if he was one of the last of a dying breed.

“It’s Monday,” Cory informed his father. “The lady who answered the ad is coming in an hour. Get cleaned up.”

Booker Ranch was a beautiful spread, complete with a huge turn of century manor house. It boasted six bedrooms, seven baths, a huge gourmet kitchen, a game room, a den, and a large office where Cory could either keep up on his bookkeeping or just relax in front of his private fireplace on a cold winter’s night. He had ten of his own horses and boarded fifteen others. He also exercised the

horses he boarded, keeping them in top shape for owners who rarely, if ever, came by for a ride. His services, which didn't come cheap, were becoming well known all over Illinois.

Between feeding, grooming, mucking, doctoring, and exercising the horses, there wasn't a lot of time for housekeeping or cooking. He had a couple of reliable employees, discounting Dwayne, but they were all cowboys, too old for rodeo life anymore. Smoky and Red were good men, great with the horses but horrible with cooking and cleaning. Both men chose to live in a small cabin closer to the barns. He needed someone to take care of the house he had lovingly refurbished. He was no good at decorating or cleaning and the meals he and the three others managed to rustle up were barely edible. As much as he hated to admit it, they were in sore need of a feminine touch. So Cory had done the only thing he could do; he placed an ad.

He was offering a decent salary, plus room and board. He had thought he would receive a lot more replies than he actually had. He had insisted all the applicants reply in writing, which immediately excluded the first few he received. He wasn't a finicky man, but he needed someone who could manage household accounts and he was not encouraged by the handwritten or typed responses. It had been six long months before he finally received something encouraging. The woman was coming from somewhere out west, which was heartening. He didn't

want some city woman afraid of her own shadow. He also didn't want someone young and flighty. This woman, Stephanie Lewis, had sounded nice and steady in her letter. He had gathered she was probably an older woman, he suspected portly and down to earth. Perfect. That was exactly what he needed.

It wasn't that Cory wasn't fond of the opposite sex. He just had no idea how to talk or act around the ones worth keeping. He knew where to go to scratch an itch; he knew how to talk to the women who attended the rodeo after parties and picnics. But that wasn't what he wanted for a long term relationship. He wanted a woman soft around the edges, the kind of woman his mother had been. But he would be damned he left her pining for a man always on the road, or emotionally unavailable even when he was around. Cory wasn't sure he could be the type of man that deserved a good woman like that, so he chose not to try to find one. The last thing he needed was for some pretty young thing to live under his roof tempting him with something he was sure he could never have.

Helping his father to his feet, he pushed him toward the bathroom. He wanted to make a good impression, but he also wanted Ms. Lewis to be fully aware what she was in for if she decided to take the job. Dwayne was not an easy man to get along with. He tended to be ornery as a bull and as mean as a snake. It was best to let her see it upfront right away.

“Take a shower and be downstairs in my study in twenty minutes,” Cory told his father before stomping out of the room.

He was halfway down the stairs when the doorbell rang. He cursed under his breath wondering who it was. Ms. Lewis wasn't due until eleven and it was barely ten now. Red and Smoky, the ranch hands, were out exercising the horses. Besides, they rarely came to the house anymore given Cory's catastrophic attempts at cooking. Muttering to himself he stomped down the rest of the stairs, determined to get rid of whoever was there.

Stephanie Lewis chewed her bottom lip as she waited on the massive porch of one of the most beautiful houses she had ever seen. The ad had been a godsend. She had left San Diego with little more than the clothes on her back. Her money was almost gone and she was just plain tired of running. She figured she could work in the middle of nowhere for a while, just so she could save up enough to keep moving. Ramon would look for her in big cities, not some ranch in the middle of nowhere. She hoped to keep it that way. She had first gone to Las Vegas. It hadn't taken more than a week for Ramon to find her. If she hadn't taken R.J. out

to buy some clothes he would have caught her. As soon as she had turned onto the street of where she was staying, she knew something was terribly wrong.

It was almost as if she could sense the danger in the air. She'd seen Ramon's truck parked in the driveway and had kept going. She hadn't stopped for the night until she reached New Mexico. It wasn't until she entered Illinois that she found a place safe enough to stay for about a month, but her money was running out. R.J. must have sensed his mother's desperate mood because he hadn't cried or acted out the entire trip. In fact, he had been a little too quiet. Stephanie worried what this mad flight was doing to her son.

She found the ad in the paper while staying in Kankakee. The man she corresponded with sounded harmless enough. He wanted someone to care for his house. Probably a widower, too old or heartbroken to do much on his own. It was the perfect opportunity to give her a little time, to let R.J. be a little boy again. When the door flew open, Stephanie almost ran back to the car. The man standing on the other side was far from the frail old man she was expecting. This man couldn't be much more than thirty or so; he had to be at least six-four, lean with ropy muscles, golden-bronze skin and the deepest blue eyes she had ever seen. His curly hair was cut short, and looked neat and well kept. She could see the red and gold highlights in the natural light. The man had to be one the sexiest men Stephanie had seen in her life. There was a rough and rugged aura that seemed to

emanate from him. Not a menace, like the one she had failed to recognize in Ramon; but a natural roughness, like a man used to hard, honest work and was unafraid to face life's challenges. He was far too much of a man for her to deal with right now. Even though she sensed no real menace in him, a trait that had come to her years too late, he was just too much man. Swallowing hard, Stephanie took an involuntary step backwards.

This was no harmless widower. *Please God, don't let this be Cory Booker*, Stephanie prayed, knowing deep down that was exactly who this man was.

"Mr. Booker?" she squeaked, hating the fear in her voice. Just because he was obviously a man in his prime did not mean he was anything like Ramon. Sooner or later, she was going to have to start interacting with the opposite sex again. It didn't mean she had to leave herself vulnerable. She desperately needed this job. She simply couldn't afford to keep running.

As much as Cory wanted to slam the door in the young woman's face, he found he couldn't move. In fact, he felt like he had taken a hoof straight to the gut. She was not beautiful, not really. The woman standing on his porch was striking. Her skin was a rich, deep brown, not dark, but then not light either, with a deep red undertone. Her hair was tightly scraped back into a severe bun, but it was jet black without a hint of browns or reds, as were her arched eyebrows. She was wearing a loose fitting dress designed to hide the generous curves he could catch a

glimpse of every so often when the wind pushed the garment against her body.

What really got Cory though were her eyes. They were deep brown, which wasn't unusual with someone of her skin tone, but it was the bright blue ring around the irises that made a person sit up and take notice. They were also extremely expressive. For some reason this woman was terrified. She looked ready to bolt if he took even a tiny step forward.

Cory frowned fiercely when a tiny hand holding the lower part of her dress caught his attention. That little hand could not belong to anyone a day over four, five maximum. It looked pale and fragile against the God-awful green material of her dress. That clinched it, there was no way he could turn her away. It was bad enough she had the look of a wild mare ready bolt at the first provocation, but she had a kid in tow.

"Ms. Lewis, I presume," Cory was careful to keep his voice pleasant and even. He may not know much about women, but he knew a skittish mare when he saw one. "Please come in."

He stepped back far enough so that she had plenty of space. Whatever she had been expecting, it wasn't him. He knew he was a big guy; if she was running from what Cory suspected she was; a big, virile man was the last person she wanted to work for. For some reason, it immediately became important for him to change her mind. Maybe it was something in those startling eyes of hers. All of a

sudden he felt this enormous urge to protect. He didn't question it; it was not a feeling he cared to examine too deeply. He just went with it. Escorting her to the only fully furnished room besides his office on the main floor, he carefully sat in a chair facing the couch, which he discreetly moved back a little. He didn't get a chance to take a good look at her child, which by the shorts and shirt he gathered was a boy. The little guy had his faced buried in his mother's side. Not a good sign.

"I'm sorry I had to bring R.J., my son, with me," Stephanie began. Cory was entranced by her voice. It was soft and melodious, with a hint of California if he wasn't mistaken. She definitely wasn't from around here.

"No problem," Cory assured her pleasantly, proud he managed not sound gruff as was his usual cadence. "We are a family ranch."

"Oh! Will your wife be joining us?"

She sounded so damn hopeful, Cory almost hated to tell her any different. "Um, I'm not married. I meant me, my father, and a couple of guys I call uncle. They used to ride with my father."

Cory wanted to curse at her crestfallen expression but he managed to hold it in. Instead, he launched into the particulars of her new job, the salary and benefits. He, of course, doubled the salary from what he originally offered. He wanted to believe he'd done it so that she could earn enough to move on, but he knew he just

wanted to make the offer too sweet to pass up. She was understandably shocked. This was not what they had discussed through the few letters they had exchanged.

“We have good schools hereabouts,” Cory went on, “for your little one.”

“No!” Stephanie hadn’t meant to shout, but the thought of leaving R.J. with anyone filled her with absolute dread. Ramon had tried to keep her son away from her. That’s why she had stayed with him for so long. Besides, R.J. was just four; she had a year before he had to begin school. “I mean, he’s only four. I’ve been homeschooling him, for pre-kindergarten. If you don’t mind, I need to keep him with me. He won’t be in the way, I promise.” She hated the pleading she heard in her own voice, but there was nothing she could do to stop it.

“Of course,” he answered smoothly. Yep, she was running. “No problem at all,” Cory rose to his feet. “If you’ll follow me, I’ll show you to your suite.”

Originally, he had planned on housing his new housekeeper on the ground floor in a nice sized bedroom near the kitchen. Scrapping that plan, he was now going to place her to the suite right next to the master suite on the third floor. They would be the only two, well three, people on that floor. Dwayne slept in one of the slightly smaller bedrooms on the second floor, because he didn’t need or want a large bathroom, walk in closet, or sitting room. There was one other empty suite on the third floor, but it was on the other side of the house. Cory didn’t want her that far away. *For protection, just in case*, he told himself. He knew it was a lie,

mostly. Unfortunately, before they could make it to the door with the child still plastered to her side, Dwayne strode through the door. Although his grizzled hair was still wet, he wore the clothes he had threw off the previous night, smelling like horse mixed with the alluring aroma of whiskey and something Cory didn't want to identify. So much for making a good, make that decent, impression.

"This her?" he demanded loudly, wincing at his own voice. "She ain't no old lady. Thought you said the lady was old? This pretty young thing doesn't look like she's used too much work, despite the ugly as sin dress. No offense," Dwayne offered to her belatedly. Catching the little hand gripping the dress he had just disparaged. "What's this?" With dexterity Cory hadn't seen in his father in years, Dwayne went to his knees just as a little head covered in light brown curls poked out slightly.

The boy was a looker. Hazel eyes stared openly at Dwayne as the older man held out his hand. With a quick look up at his mother, the boy took one tiny step towards Dwayne, then another. Dwayne didn't move as he waited patiently for the little boy to make his way slowly to him.

"I bet you like horses, don't 'cha?" Dwayne drawled.

The boy nodded his head solemnly. His little rosebud mouth stayed tightly closed. There was a slight red tint in the apple cheeks and creases that suggested

deep dimples, should anyone ever get him to smile. His skin was a light gold, similar to Cory's own skin tone if he ever stayed out of the sun.

"We got a lot of 'em here," Dwayne told him. "I bet you're a natural born cowboy, huh? You ever rode a horse?" At the boy's shake of the head, Dwayne went on. "Well, you'll certainly get a chance now, won't 'cha? Would you like for me to take you to see the horses?"

"Mommy, can I?"

It had to be the sweetest little voice Cory had ever heard. Seeing the doubt in his mother's eyes and knowing the disappointment that would come with a no, Cory decided to step in.

"He'll be fine," he said quickly, moving to usher her out of the room and up to the suite he had decided to give her. "Dwayne may be a tactless bast- old coot, but he is good with kids, especially around horses." *As long as the kid wasn't his own*, he added mentally.

Stephanie didn't want to let R.J. go, but she found herself nodding. She didn't know what it was, but she trusted Cory Booker. Not a good sign. As she followed him up the massive oak staircase, she found herself watching a very delectable looking behind hugged by tight denim. Not a good sign at all.

CHAPTER TWO

Stephanie watched R.J. through the huge kitchen windows; her son was riding in front of the very strange Dwayne Booker while Cory rode by their side. His little hand clutched what she had recently learned was the saddle horn as he laughed at something one of the men said. All three looked happy. Though Cory had warned her about his father, in the two months she had been here, Dwayne had been nothing but the soul of kindness to her little boy, though he rarely spoke to her. R.J. now got up before the sun so he could help “Papa ‘Wayne” feed and water the horses. Dwayne was surly at times, and she had been careful to keep R.J. in her rooms whenever the older man had stumbled in from a night drinking; but that seemed to be happening less and less as he took charge of R.J.’s so-called education. In fact, it had been a while since the last time Dwayne had gone out drinking. Everyday the little boy bounced in the kitchen with the four other men on the ranch for meals informing her of all the things he had learned.

She was grateful for the help with R.J., though her job wasn’t particularly onerous. She cooked most of the meals, did some day to day house chores. Cory insisted she hire and supervise someone three times a week to help clean. After a week, he decided it should be two people. He gave her complete *carte blanche* in decorating the entire house. It had taken almost a full month, but she was pleased

with the results. Because it was a ranch, she chosen to do most of the house in a western motif with heavy Native American influences. Dwayne had told her Cory's mother was part Arapaho, so she wanted to be sure to add that to his home. The house, which had been threadbare at best, was now brightly decorated in rich hues of reds, burnt orange, golden yellow and blues. The kitchen was a mixture of a yellow-gold color and chili pepper red. The overall effect was cheery, which was good because this is where she spent most of her time.

She was comfortable here, maybe a little too comfortable. She had even begun to forgo her oversized clothing for simple jeans and t-shirts. The ranch never received visitors aside from clients who wanted their horses boarded here. It was kind of sad that the majority of the people who boarded their horses rarely came to ride them. Cory had told her it most of them were judges, doctors and the like from Chicago who liked the idea of having a horse, but wanted none of the responsibility. Being so close to Chicago, many of the affluent boarded horses in smaller outlying towns like Lockport and promptly forgot about them. Everyone at Booker Ranch loved and cared for each horse equally, ensuring all got plenty of love and attention. She learned there were basically six types of horses that belonged to the ranch; four Quarter horses, four Appaloosas, three Arabs, two Pintos and two Paints. The horses that boarded here where of various breeds, sizes and temperaments, though Cory and his crew seemed familiar with all of them.

Maybe that was part of the reason Stephanie felt so secure here. Men who took care of the animals the way they did at Booker Ranch rarely hit women. All of the men here had been nothing but respectful and downright differential towards her.

Sighing heavily, she finished washing the lunch dishes in the sink, then dried her hands.

“That didn’t sound good.”

Stephanie jumped at the sound of the sexy drawl coming from behind her. Cory moved slowly into the room to stand a few feet away from her. He always did that, stand just a little ways off, careful not to come too close. Stephanie was unsure whether he did it because that was just his way or rather because he saw more than she intended to show. She suspected the latter.

“Sorry,” he apologized, his dreamy blue eyes ensnaring her own. “Didn’t mean to scare you.”

Stephanie’s heartbeat sped precipitously and pounded so loudly she was sure he could hear it. Cory Booker had ceased to scare her after about a week in his home. The feelings the gorgeous man inspired in her was something she had never thought to feel again. In addition to her racing heart, butterflies took flight in her belly every time he looked her. His eyes always stared directly into her own without wavering, making her feel like he didn’t want to miss a word she uttered. Her hands got clammy and literally itched to feel if his curly hair was as silky as it

looked, to run across that broad chest that strained every shirt he wore. Her mouth watered as she watched his mouth whenever he spoke. She definitely quaked every time he was near, but it wasn't from fear. Cory's attention forced her to see him in way she never thought to think about a man again.

Oh, she was still terrified by the very thought of Ramon, or of him finding her here. But as she had observed Cory, she had begun to see that not all men were brutal, cruel bullies after only one thing. Stephanie had never been with anyone but Ramon. They started dating when she was sixteen and he was twenty-one. Because she was raised in foster homes, no one really cared about the teenaged ward of the state dating a grown man. Right after high school graduation, Ramon had moved her into his home which he shared with his mother and sister. Stephanie was just seventeen and pregnant. Believing that Ramon loved her, she had gone happily with him and walked straight into a nightmare.

It began with a cruel word here or there, then progressed to Ramon telling her how she should dress, who she could hang out with, where she could go and when. Then came the hitting. There was no help from Ramon's mother or sister; Ramon supported them all, and as far as his family members were concerned, he could do no wrong. They believed she must be provoking him. She was little better than trash to the well-to-do Delgado women. After R.J. was born, Ramon's abuses became even more sinister. He would often make her perform sexual acts in front

of his friends then beat her when they were alone because the other men had seen her. She knew she had to leave before he thought of even more degrading things to do to her. Ramon was fast losing his sanity. But she was rarely alone, constantly watched. At the first chance of escape, she sped out of town without looking back. Until this moment, she had believed Ramon had killed all the desire she would ever have for the opposite sex. Cory Booker proved her wrong.

Standing there in his low riding jeans, tight t-shirt and cowboy hat; he was a wet dream come to life for any normal, red-blooded woman.

“Winter’s comin’,” Cory went on. “Noticed you and the boy don’t have much in the way of winter clothes. Thought I might take you to get some.”

“Oh, no. I’m sure we’ll be fine.”

Even as she said it, she knew it to be untrue. She had read about winters here in Illinois. Her jeans, t-shirts and oversized dresses would do little to battle against the bitter cold and snow. She was definitely going to have to get things for R.J. He had grown so much over the last two months; his little clothes barely fit. There would be no way she could keep him inside all winter. He had grown attached to the cranky old cowboys here and it would break his heart not to be able to go out with Dwayne and the others.

“No, you won’t,” Cory stated firmly, mentally wincing at the authoritarian tone. The last thing he wanted to do was spook her. He had treaded carefully

whenever he talked to her and had enjoyed watching the wary look in her eyes slowly but surely dissipate. The last thing he wanted to do was bring it back.

“Come on. I’ll go get cleaned up and we’ll ride into Chicago.”

Stephanie froze. She had no idea where Ramon was looking for her, but she was damn sure he probably had people looking for her in every major city in the west. Who knew how far east he was looking? He knew she had been born in raised in the city and felt more comfortable in an urban environment. That was why after Las Vegas she stayed as far away as possible from any major city. She ran the risk of more people remembering a woman and a young child in smaller communities, but it was still safer away from low lives and thugs Ramon often used for his dirty work.

“Isn’t there somewhere around here we could go? I remember seeing a couple of discount stores on my way in.”

Cory pushed back his hat and scratched his head. He hadn’t expected that, though he probably should have. There was no way in hell he was taking her to some cheap discount store. Stephanie Lewis deserved more than that. After leaving the rodeo life behind and starting this place, Cory had managed to make a pretty penny. Until she had shown up on his doorstep, he had no idea what he would do with it other than expanding the ranch a bit. He couldn’t deny the immediate attraction he felt for Stephanie, but he was no fool. This woman had been abused -

badly. He was willing to wait and work at it. Somewhere along the line he had decided to keep Stephanie, permanently. All he had to do was get her to agree.

“Stephie,” Cory began moving closer to lightly touch her arm. “I’m no fool. I know you’re running from something or someone. I promise on my life I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Stephanie shivered. Whether it was from the warm caress of his deep baritone voice or the electric charge she felt from the simple innocent touch, she couldn’t say. The man had to be some kind of magician to make her forget the horror she had went through with Ramon. It was dangerous to believe in anyone other than herself, but she found she couldn’t help it. Cory made her feel safer than she had ever felt in her life, even in the early days with Ramon before he showed her who he really was. She loved the way Cory called her Stephie, the way he opened doors for her, and pulled out her chair. She didn’t carry in groceries or supplies, she never moved anything heavy. Most of all, he listened to her. He had let her arrange his home the way she saw fit, he trusted her with household funds, never questioning a purchase or decision. He made her feel like a woman, and not to mention the way he made her panties wet every time he looked at her. She went to bed many a night yearning in a way she never had before.

Stephanie found herself nodding as Cory led her to the staircase.

“Wear something pretty,” he told her stopping outside her door. “Dwayne, Red and Smoky have agreed to watch R.J. We’ll make a night of it.”

She wasn’t so sure what she felt about that. However, she couldn’t deny how good the ranch hands were with R.J. They treated him like he was their own grandson, Dwayne more so than others. It had been so long since she went anywhere, and even then she never had a good time.

“Okay,” she whispered in agreement. She still had at least one dress that didn’t remind her of her life before. She had bought it on a whim, thinking she probably would never get a chance to wear it. It had been an extravagant waste of money, or so she told herself at the time. She was glad she had bought it now.

CHAPTER THREE

Hurrying, Stephanie showered, then used to lotion with sparkles all over her body. She even put on a little mascara and some colored lip gloss before slipping into the pure white cotton sundress, loving the way the white played off the deep browns and reds of her skin. She left her hair down, curling the ends down just a touch. Finishing off with white strappy high heeled sandals, she opened the door to find Cory waiting patiently in the hall.

Her breath caught at the sight of him. He was wearing simple black slacks, a black short sleeved shirt, shiny black cowboy boots and a black Stetson. He looked positively edible. The black set off the golden tint of his skin to perfection.

“Ready?” Cory asked as she exited her rooms. Stephanie could only nod.

Cory was inordinately proud of himself. He had managed not to jump on her as soon as she walked out into the hall. She looked delicious. He had longed to see what her hair looked like down and free from the clips and barrettes she was forever wearing. The jet-black mass fell to her shoulders, which would have been bare but for the spaghetti straps of the form fitting dress she was wearing. He kept casting surreptitious glances at the smooth brown legs that teased him from the above the knee hemline. Thank God the pants he was wearing were looser than his

regular jeans. There would be no way to hide the growing evidence of his attraction. He was going to be lucky to make it through the rest of the day without making a complete fool of himself.

They bantered lightly during the long drive into the city. Stephanie grew quieter the closer they came to the tall buildings of downtown. Cory chose to park at a Metra station just outside of the city and take the train the rest of the way in. Parking downtown was a son-of-bitch. Taking hold of her hand, Cory didn't let go as they rode in relative silence into the sprawling city. Once there, he took a chance and wrapped his arm around her shoulder, pulling her securely against him. He let out a breath he didn't know he had been holding as he felt her body relax against his. After about an hour of intense shopping, he felt all the tension leave her body completely, though he kept her firmly against him whenever they were on the street. It did nothing to ease the growing ache between his legs, but it felt too damned good to let her go.

Stephanie had two months of her extraordinary salary to assist her purchasing her and R.J. the things they would need for the winter, but Cory didn't give her that chance. He insisted on purchasing an embarrassing amount of things at the most ridiculous prices she had ever seen. It was wrong on so many levels. Independent women did NOT let men try to buy them; but she knew that was not what Cory was trying to do. He was the ultimate in the protector/provider type.

He had actually been hurt when she tried to argue against him buying her anything. If she spent too long looking at anything, the next thing she knew she was trying it on and while she was redressing, Cory bought it. No matter how it might grate to have him insisting on paying for everything, a part of her admitted it felt nice. He wasn't asking for anything in return. He wasn't telling her how to dress, as Ramon had, nor was he trying to dress her in a way that would please him. He was simply purchasing whatever caught her eye. It didn't make it right, but it felt damn good.

"Are you hungry?" Cory asked as they made their way back to where they had left his truck. He sent up a silent prayer of thanks that he had chosen to buy the four door F-150. They were both heavily loaded with shopping bags from their excursion.

"Starving," Stephanie admitted. They had walked for blocks, running in and out of various stores. Not only had she picked up a complete winter wardrobe for her and R.J., but Cory had bought a multitude of toys to keep R.J. busy on the days he couldn't go outside.

They drove to a little secluded restaurant in Evergreen Park. Though technically a part of Chicago, traffic was a bit calmer and the overall atmosphere was homier, much like a small community encased inside a mammoth city. They settled into a nice dinner like a real couple. He didn't want to give her a chance to

think about the fact they were on what anyone would classify as a date. He kept her interest by regaling her with tales from his rodeo days, causing her to laugh aloud at the antics of his youth.

“I never knew much about cowboys,” she told him as they sat quietly sharing after dinner coffee. “I mean aside from what I’ve seen on TV.”

“Never believe what you see on TV,” Cory laughed. “I have yet to see much that resembled anything like the real thing.” He then proceeded to launch into a somewhat detailed history of cowboys and the kinds of life they had led historically.

Stephanie was definitely impressed by Cory’s wide range of knowledge. She had been a history buff in school, but she never really had a chance to study any further than high school. It had been her dream to go to college. She sometimes wondered if that was why Ramon had insisted they start a family early. She had been painfully ignorant and, as a result, trusting of her older boyfriend. She knew it was partly her fault for letting him talk her into having a child so young, but she couldn’t regret having R.J. He was the light of her world.

“The word ‘cowboy’ derived from the African American, Mexican and Indian wranglers in the Old West. I have a couple books you can read if you want to.”

“I’d love that!” Stephanie agreed excitedly. She loved to get lost in other times and places.

“You could even take classes if you wanted to. There is St. Francis out in Joliet, not far from the ranch.”

Cory almost kicked himself at the wistful, but crestfallen look on her face. Of course she wouldn’t feel safe enough to do that. Not yet anyway. He just wanted to see that smile for a little while longer. It was like bright sunshine breaking through after a storm. He would give anything to see that smile more often.

“Can you dance?” Cory asked suddenly.

“What?”

“Dance. Can you?” He didn’t really wait for her corresponding “yeah,” before he was dragging her out to the car. Turning back towards Chicago, he took her into Robbins, one of the oldest majority-black suburbs in the Chicago. Manny’s Blue Room was one of his favorite places whenever he came to town. Located a mere seventeen miles south of the Loop, it was where he could go and listen to good blues music while unwinding. Though they boasted a famous blues line-up for live performances, the place had the feel of the average neighborhood bar. Being a week night, the place wasn’t very crowded, which was perfect. He took her

straight to the dance floor that only held a few other couples, and pulled her into his arms.

She was a little stiff at first, gradually relaxing well into the third song. It was probably a mistake, but Cory couldn't resist pulling her tightly against his body as he moved her sensuously to the music. She smelled so good, a combination of honeysuckles and sunshine. He couldn't keep his hands from wandering down her spine, or caressing her soft, smooth bare shoulders. If he had thought he had a hard on before, it was nothing compared to the painful rock-hard erection he was sporting now. To his surprise, Stephanie didn't shy away it, but rubbed her belly against him, making him groan in her hair. *She's not ready*, he repeated to himself over and over again. It didn't help. He wanted her in a way he had never wanted anything in his life.

Stephanie knew exactly what she was doing. She knew she couldn't stay at Booker Ranch forever. Sometime during dinner she had made up her mind, she didn't want to live the rest of her life holding nothing but fantasies about what might have been. Cory was a good, decent man. She was impressed that he not only knew about places like this, which catered to a largely African American clientele, but he felt completely comfortable here. It was also obvious he had been here before. He was comfortable in his own skin and with all those around him. He didn't judge people on how they looked, or where they came from. He was really a

genuinely good guy. If she could have that, just for a little while, it would be worth the heartbreak sure to come after she left. No matter what she did, it was going to hurt like hell to leave him; might as well have something worth hurting about.

“Cory?”

He didn’t think it possible, but he stiffened even more at the arousal plain as day in her voice.

“Yeah?”

“Take me home.”

His arms tightened reflexively at the simple statement. He knew exactly what she was asking. Only a fool would say no, and Cory Booker was no one’s fool.

“Are you sure?” God knows he didn’t want to ask the question, but he had to. As badly as he wanted her, he couldn’t forget that she was running. He didn’t want her to regret a second spent with him.

Stephanie stopped on the dance floor and looked him squarely in the eyes. The blue ring around her irises seemed glow in the dim club lights. Damn, she was beautiful.

“I’m sure. Please, take me home.”

CHAPTER FOUR

He wasn't going to make it. Even as he drove dangerously faster than the speed limit, he knew he wasn't going to make it back to Lockport before he had to have her. Pulling off the interstate in Cicero, he turned to her.

"Stephie, baby, I'm sorry, but do you mind if I, I mean if we..." Damn! How do you say to a woman you had to get inside her before you explode and have her *not* slap you in the face?

"It's okay, I understand," she told him, every bit as anxious. She wanted to climb into his lap right there and have her wicked way that incredible body she knew he was hiding under those clothes. Of course, she would never do it, but Lord how she wanted to!

Cory made another quick turn, heading towards Oak Park. He'd be damned if he'd take her to some seedy motel. There was a pretty nice bed and breakfast he remembered seeing something about on the news. He just prayed they had a vacancy.

Oh God, this is really happening, Stephanie thought to herself as she stared up at the man who had just laid her gently on the turned down bed. It seemed to have taken forever to get here. Now, here she was, in the delicate looking Chalet Suite at Harvey House Bed & Breakfast. The room was decorated in white; white stained wood furnishing, white stone fireplace, white coverlet decorated with delicate blue flowers, white sheets. She felt something like a vestal virgin about to be delectably debauched. She watched in fascination as Cory removed his hat, his boots, then his shirt, leaving only his slacks. Talk about washboard abs! She could clean a load of two on that stomach! Though he was thin, there was nothing skinny about him. He had well defined pecs, broad shoulders and arms that look plenty strong to hold a woman all night long. Unquestionably good enough to eat. He crawled up the bed like a giant golden lynx. Though she was still fully dressed she felt bare under the intensity of his gaze. It was like he was looking down into her very soul, every secret exposed for his examination.

“Understand Stephanie, once we do this, you’re mine,” Cory growled. “Get my meaning? I don’t want to scare you, or upset you, but you need to be very sure about this. I damn sure am.”

Stephanie swallowed hard. She knew he was attracted to her, had seen the way his eyes followed her when they were in the same room, and one would have to be blind not to see the hard-on he was sporting most of the time she was around.

His constant perusal didn't make her half as nervous as common sense decreed. She loved the way he watched her. He made her feel desirable again.

"I can't stay," she whispered. "Not forever. I can only offer you right now."

He had known that, but that didn't stop the shooting pain that blossomed in his chest at the words spoken out loud.

"I can't make you stay," he admitted, more to himself than to her. "But I intend to make it hard as hell for you to just walk away."

Even as he said it he began to slowly undress her. He started with her shoes, taking his own sweet time unbuckling one, leisurely sliding it off her foot before moving the other one. Instead moving to remove her dress, he took a foot into his hands to rub it with deep, languid strokes. He rubbed the limb for a good five minutes before moving on the other. By the time he pulled her into a sitting position she was so relaxed, it felt as if he had given her a full body massage.

"You're so beautiful, baby," Cory murmured, his hands snaking around her back to slowly unzip her dress.

Even if she didn't quite believe it to be true, he certainly made her *feel* beautiful. He peeled the dress from her body slowly, stopping to kiss her shoulders, her neck, her lips. She wanted to scream out in frustration as the dress began to feel too heavy and suffocating. Her body ached to feel the cool breeze of the night air, to feel the touch of his wonderfully large hands. He was treating the

process like he was unwrapping a precious gift and didn't want to rip the wrapping paper; all she wanted to do was to was rip the wrapping trapping her and get closer to him. Every brush of his hand made her burn with need. She longed to rub her body against his bare skin like a cat. By the time he had her down to her underwear she was a whimpering quivering mass of nerve endings.

Cory rocked back on his knees to gaze at the woman spread out for him like a feast for a sultan. Her body was pure perfection. She had all the curves of a real woman, ripe and full. God, he loved a woman with curves! But this wasn't just any woman. This was the woman he had waited his whole life for. He would take it slow, even if it killed him, and it just might. Running his hands along her body, he kneaded and caressed, taking note what made her sigh, what made her whimper. He wanted her desperate for him; as desperate as he felt for her. He wanted to see her let go, to come completely undone by his hand. He ran his hand lightly across her core, reveling in the wetness and heat he felt there.

"Oh, baby is that all for me?" he rasped.

A needy sob was his only reply. Settling himself between her legs, he licked her; one languorous stroke over little black lace panties had her arching into his waiting mouth. He teased her through the near-transparent cloth until she was crying out mindlessly. Smiling, he eased the offending cloth off until nothing stood between him and what was sure to become his favorite meal.

Stephanie felt as if she was surely going insane. Her hands clutched the sheets frantically as he licked, sucked, probed and then pulled back. If his goal had been to drive her crazy, he was succeeding beyond all expectations.

“Please, oh God, Cory please!”

She knew she was begging, but she didn’t care she needed him now! He took his own sweet time before finally siding up her body. As soon as she felt his probing length searching for her entrance, she angled her hips to try to force him inside.

“Oh, damn!” Cory exclaimed as his tip disappeared inside. It took every ounce of control he had to hold still enough to slide in carefully. He was not a little man in any way; he didn’t want to hurt her. She was excruciatingly tight around him. He had to fight to hold back from plunging in.

Stephanie had never felt so full in her life! He stretched her so completely, so exquisitely, she felt every thrust deep in her womb. Although he had to be the largest man she had ever seen, he was so careful not to hurt her. She felt tears welling in her eyes at how gentle this huge man was with her. Even as he moved deep inside of her, he held her close, his arms pulling her against his searing skin.

“Baby, you are so tight, so perfect,” he murmured, kissing her everywhere he could reach with his lips. “You were made just for me, sweetheart. Oh, God we fit together so good! Look at me, baby.”

His eyes trapped hers as he moved in and out in languid strokes, making her feel more in this short time than she had ever felt in her life. Sex had been pleasant at best before, but nothing compared to the sensations running through her body now. She felt so complete, so right. As his movements became more urgent and less deliberate, she found herself moving with him; her hips rising to meet his every down stroke. With every stroke, he hit that special place deep inside her, setting off a series of minor explosions deep inside her.

“Yeah, baby, like that,” he encouraged, his gaze still holding her prisoner.
“Take what you need.”

She had experienced orgasms before, not many, but a few. Nothing she had ever experienced before compared to the soul-shattering peak she reached as he cupped her buttocks, pushing deeper and deeper until she was unsure where he stopped and she began. Her fingers dug into his skin frantically as the damn burst, sending her flying into a million little pieces. Cory could hold back no longer. He dimly heard her scream of pleasure as her walls clamped down on him in a vice grip, causing him to explode deep inside her. Never in his entire thirty-three years had he ever come so hard. He held himself deep inside her, even after spasms had subsided. If he ever had a doubt this woman was born to be his life-mate, they were erased right then and there. This is where he wanted to be for the rest of his life. This was home.

Cory rolled over to his side, taking Stephanie gathered in his arms with him. They didn't talk, they didn't need to. Both knew something monumental had happened here tonight. It was so much more than sex, or even making love. Two souls had completely combined to create a whole. Stephanie had never felt so completely in tuned to anyone, not that she had much experience to compare. Then again, she really didn't need any comparison. This was a man worth falling in love with; and in that second she knew she already had.

CHAPTER FIVE

Ramon Delgato ground his teeth as he slouched in the car outside the bed and breakfast. How could she? After all he had done for her! He had taken away from a loveless foster home and given her a family, and what did she do? She ran off with some hick the first chance she got! And she had taken his son! He could have forgiven her lapse in judgment concerning the Ramon Jr., but sleeping with the farm boy was unforgivable. She would have to be punished. She needed to be reminded they were a family.

It did not compute that Stephanie had left him close to a year ago, long before winding up here in Illinois. He did not take into account the things he had done to her the night before she had fled. In his mind, he had given her every thing and she had thrown it back in his face. To him, it had been providence that he had finally found her. He was in Chicago on business and had just happened to see her downtown accompanied by the man she was with right now. He had people looking for her all over California, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico. He never imagined she would make it this far east.

That he had finally found her just proved they were supposed to be together. She belonged to him, and he would get her back. All he needed to do was come up

with a plan. Farm boy didn't matter, he was less than nothing. Stephanie would see that and come home to him. She needed a real man, a man like him. She would see that soon.

"You want to tell me what you're running from?" Cory asked much later as he held Stephanie in his arms.

She had thought it would be hard to talk about Ramon, especially to Cory. He was quite simply everything Ramon was not; what would he think of her for being with someone like Ramon? But as she lay in his arms she found herself spilling every detail. He didn't judge her or call her stupid for staying as long as she did. He just silently held her as she went through her life in San Diego. His arms tightened around her when she had finished.

"I know I was stupid for staying with him for so long," she admitted. "But I had nowhere else to go."

"You're not stupid," Cory insisted. "I understand how a woman can get trapped like that."

And he did. While Dwayne was never physically abusive to his mother, he had been emotionally abusive, distant and often cold. He had watched his mother in tears so many times; because of his father, he swore he would never do that to a

woman. He would never treat anyone with such blatant disrespect or cruelty. It had taken a while for him to forgive his father. If not for his mother's deathbed request that he get to know Dwayne, he doubted he would have bothered. It made him mad as hell that anyone would mistreat Stephanie. She was not only beautiful, she was sweet and loving.

"You don't have to run anymore, Stephanie," he told her, squeezing her close. "I protect my own, and well, you and R.J. are a part of the family. More than you realize."

Stephanie felt her heart skip a beat. What did he mean a part of the family? Surely, he just meant a part of the ranch. He couldn't possibly mean anything more permanent, not after knowing her for just two months. Of course, in her heart of hearts, she had longed for something to develop between her and Cory, but she never imagined it would ever happen. *One day at a time*, she told herself. *Yeah, he slept with you, but that doesn't mean anything.*

Cory shifted on the bed so that he was staring down into her eyes.

"What I'm saying, and not too well, is, I would like to make this more a lasting thing."

"You want me to continue to sleep with you?" Stephanie asked, not quite sure where this was going or if she liked what she thought he was saying. "Be your..."

“My wife!” he declared adamantly. “I...You are like a breath of fresh air to me. I think I fell in love with you the moment I first saw you. I need you, Stephanie, and I want you to need me too. I want to be a father to R.J. To teach him everything I know and maybe learn some new things along the way. I don’t expect you to answer right away; I just want you to be clear about the way I feel. I need you to know that this is not just about one night. I can provide for you and R.J...Umpf!”

“Yes!” Stephanie threw herself up into his arms. “Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Cory let the force of her vault into his arms propel them backwards onto the bed. He had never felt so relieved in his life! He knew it was probably too soon to lay it all on the line like that, but damn it, he had to make this woman his in every way. She had managed to thaw a heart he had not realized was frozen. When he left the rodeo circuit, he thought his life was over, that he would never feel whole again. Then in walked Stephanie all sweet, innocent and scared. She made him feel like he could do anything, and for her he wanted to.

Stephanie could not hold back the tears that fell freely as she buried herself in his arms. Sure she had wanted desperately to have a relationship with a man as solid as Cory had shown himself to be, yet she never imagined he would ask her to be his wife!

Stephanie was on cloud nine. After the night at the bed and breakfast Cory had presented her with the biggest rock she had ever seen and had insisted they spend every night in the same bed. He was attentive, loving, and affectionate - everything a woman could dream in a man. Had anyone told her there was such a man five short months ago she would have laughed at them. For the first time in her life, Stephanie felt like she was part of a family. Even Dwayne went out of his way to make sure she felt completely at home and wanted. She felt like she was living a fairy tale; she just hoped there was no wicked witch waiting to tear it all apart.

“Mommy! Mommy! I rode Ranger all by myself!”

R.J. ran into the kitchen, his little nose red from the growing cold of an early fall cold front. Dwayne sauntered in behind him, a wide grin deepening the wrinkles on his face.

“Ranger?” Stephanie was pretty sure she had memorized all of the names of the horses belonging to the ranch, though she could not remember a Ranger.

“It’s my pony! Daddy and Pop Pop bought him for ‘em for me and let me name ‘em and everything!”

Stephanie’s eyes flew to Dwayne. Daddy? Pop Pop? Pony?

“It ain’t nothin’ but a Fell pony, good for youngins to learn on,” Dwayne explained more than a little sheepishly. “Small enough for him to learn to care for

the right way. Early birthday present is all.” Turning the excited little boy he grabbed a hold of his little hand. “Come on Junior. Time to get cleaned up for dinner.”

She didn’t have time to question him any further; they were out of the kitchen and up the stairs in a blink of an eye. Putting aside R.J.’s birthday wasn’t until next summer, when did R.J. start calling Cory, Daddy or Dwayne, Pop Pop? It didn’t bother her as much as shocked her. She and Cory had only been engaged for a month. She had feared R.J.’s reaction but had been pleasantly surprised at his easy acceptance. She had not expected him to accept it to point of calling him Daddy though. As much as she wanted to wish it away or ignore it, R.J. was Ramon’s son. In fact, his name was Ramon Javier Delgato, Junior. How could she just wipe away a part of who her son was? Did she even have that right? No matter what Ramon had done to her, he was R.J.’s father.

Stephanie was so deep in thought she didn’t notice when Cory entered the kitchen until his arms wrapped around her.

“What’s wrong, baby?” Cory hated to see her frown. The waves of confusion and frustration surrounding her were almost palpable. He would move heaven and earth to keep her happy; to see her otherwise made him physically ache.

“When did R.J. start to call you Daddy?”

The question caught him someone off guard. He knew exactly when, right

after they had announced their engagement. It had felt damn good, so natural, he felt as if the little boy had granted him an extreme honor. In such a short amount of time, R.J. had come to mean the world to him, much like the little boy's mother.

"Right after we told him we were getting married," he answered honestly. He didn't release his hold on her, nor did he allow her to move when she tried to do so. "Does it bother you?" He had never considered that it would. He couldn't imagine why, but he was more than willing to listen and to address her concerns.

"It doesn't bother me," she answered slowly. "I just can't believe I didn't notice it."

Cory didn't believe for second that was it. "And?" he prompted.

"I took R.J. away from his father," she admitted heavily. "I mean, I don't have the right to keep R.J. from him do I? Ramon is his father. R.J. has the right to know his father, right?"

It wasn't an easy question. If he wanted to be fair, he would have to say the boy had a right to know his father, but Cory didn't feel like being fair. As far as he was concerned, this Ramon character could go hang. Still, Stephanie was feeling bad about it, so he was willing to be a little charitable. Very little.

"How did he treat R.J.?" Cory asked, not sure if he wanted to know the answer. He already felt like killing this man he had never even met; he suspected that feeling might intensify a bit.

“He ignored him for the most part.” Stephanie thought back carefully, going over her time with Ramon after R.J.’s birth. “He was very proud his first child was a boy. He would show him off. But other than that, he didn’t seem too interested.”

He let out relieved sigh. He had expected from what she had told him this Ramon person was probably not the type to be a good father. He was far too interested in his own comfort and needs. For men like Ramon, it was all about control; they loved no one but themselves. Cory had run into far too many of that type in the rodeo business. Most cowboys were decent God-fearing people, but you were bound to meet up with the over inflated egos of those who believed their own hype.

“It sounds to me like taking R.J. with you was a pretty smart thing to do,” Cory encouraged, squeezing her just a bit. “But I tell you what, when R.J. gets a little older, we’ll let him make that decision okay?”

Stephanie nodded, relaxing in her fiancé’s arms. She couldn’t help but feel safe and cherished by the way Cory held her. In the short amount of time she had known him, he had ensured she was well taken care of. Not just materially, but emotionally and spiritually as well. She would give thanks every single day of her life for having met him, no matter what the future might bring.

“Don’t worry about it today,” Cory murmured into her hair. “We’ll face it together.”

“I know,” she said softly. “Thank you.”

They were silent for a moment, offering and receiving quiet comfort in one another’s arms. Then Stephanie remembered something. Stepping back to look up at him she asked, “A pony?”

CHAPTER SIX

Cory bent down to study the hefty sized hole in the fence. This was not the work of some wild animal trying to get in, nor was it one of the horses trying to get out. The fence was too close to the highway that ran along the northeastern edge of the property. Wild animals would not be wandering that close to the busy roadway; not any animal big enough to make this kind of hole anyway. Horses tended to try to knock down fences, not chew through them, plus the hole was too low to the ground for it to be a horse. Examining the broken edges carefully, he saw the fence had defiantly been cut. The footprints around the hole weren't fresh; they were hardened indents of a man's shoe going in and out of the property. It had been lightly snowing lately, usually melting before noon. Since these footprints were hard, it meant it had been a couple of days since they were made. Someone had been reconnoitering.

Smoky and Red had come to him this morning, telling him that something gotten the dogs all riled up last night. After inspecting the barn, stables and tack room, they set out to check the property. They had walked around a bit, but had seen nothing out of the ordinary, until they spotted the hole. Cory had felt a chill run down his spine. For about a week now he was getting the feeling someone was

watching him, or rather, watching the house. He didn't like it one bit. He decided to ride around the property this morning and had found this. This hole was too far from the house. He had a sneaking suspicion there where probably others.

"Whatcha got chief?" Smoky asked, still mounted on his own horse, Red by his side.

"Someone definitely cut the fence." Cory stood slowly. "Go ahead and patch it up. I'm going to ride along the fence line to see if they broke in anywhere else."

Cory found four other holes. As with the first one, the tracks around it were somewhat older; the footprints in the dirt had long since been hardened by the sun. It was the one closest to the main house that worried him the most. Those footprints were fresh. Canvassing around the house, Cory found several cigarette butts as well as fresh footprints. Someone had been skulking around the house. He had no doubt as to the identity of the intruder. Walking over to Red, who had followed him on his inspection, he handed the older man the reins of his horse, instructing him to take the horse back to the stables.

"I think I'll stick close to the house for a couple of days," Cory told the other man.

Red nodded sagely. Cory didn't need to explain the situation to Red or Smoky. They were both wise enough to know when Stephanie had shown up, she

had been running from something. Her jumpiness was as good as telling the others she had been abused by a boyfriend or spouse.

“I’m thinkin’ maybe the future missus and the boy would like to have a house dog. Know someone with an Akita,” Red offered. He was a man of few words, but his meaning was clear.

Akitas were good guard dogs. As long as the dog was trained properly, it shouldn’t have a problem with R.J.

“Yeah, Red, you do that. You and Smoky take turns riding around the property. Give me a call on my cell if you see anything.”

“Will do boss,” Red said riding away.

Cory made his way into the house, finding Dwayne with R.J. in the den. Leaning against the door, he watched in silence while Dwayne read to R.J. about Addison Jones, a range boss who rode the Goodnight Loving Trail in New Mexico. It was a story Dwayne had read to him as a child, whenever he was in town. That particular story ended with a song written for the famous cowboy. Though Dwayne’s voice was rough and off-key, he sang with so much feeling, it was downright beautiful.

The change that had come over Dwayne since Stephanie and R.J. had come into their lives was amazing. Gradually, he had stopped going out to the bars at night, devoting most of his time with little R.J. The old man had even bought the

boy a pony to teach him to ride. It seemed as if Dwayne was trying to make up for Cory's own childhood. The little boy even slept in Dwayne's room now on a little bed set up right next to Dwayne's. Instead of the jealousy or hard feelings about the past, Cory was delighted. It was almost as if the little boy had given Dwayne a reason to live - redemption.

When Dwayne began the story of Nate Love, Cory quietly slipped away. He found Stephanie changing the sheets on his bed.

"Mornin' sweetheart," he announced from the door. He never snuck up on her; she was still a little too jumpy for that.

Glancing over her shoulder she smiled as he moved forward, making his heart pound just a little faster and little harder. Just that smile never failed to make him believe in happily ever after, something he had long since given up happening. Before she wound up on his doorstep, he had been a bitter man, believing fate had dealt him a harsh blow. She had made him grateful his back would not allow him to follow the circuit anymore. He was in deep, and he loved every second of it.

"I thought you were out with the horses," Stephanie smiled up at him as he moved to take her in his arms.

"Red and Smoky are taking care of it," he told her, leaning down to kiss her firmly.

As soon as their lips touched, the heat that always seemed to engulf Cory

whenever he was around his woman ignited into a full flame. Moaning, he pressed her closer to him, his hands slipping down to her buttocks to pull her against his now raging erection. He couldn't help but revel in way she went pliant in her arms. She trusted him not to hurt her. It was a precious gift he would cherish for the rest of his life. He had seen enough in life to know women who had been abused did not trust again easily. He moved them backwards until her legs bumped against the bed. Applying gentle pressure, he followed her down as she flopped back on the bed, nestling his body between her legs.

“What about R.J.?” she whispered breathlessly.

Cory didn't pause; his lips trailed from her cheek, to her ear, where he nipped at her small lobes, to move back to her soft, billowy lips. “He's being entertained by Dwayne,” he murmured between kisses. “Cowboy stories. They'll be busy for a few hours at least.”

Stephanie couldn't help but laugh. “A few hours?”

“Umm,” Cory murmured, taking her lips one more.

His mouth did not leave hers as he moved his hands between their straining bodies to unbutton her shirt. Once he managed to free her breasts from the front-clasped bra, he had to lean back to take a look. She had to have the most beautiful breasts he had ever seen. Full and firm, they were perfectly formed globes that never failed to give him endless delight. Damn, he loved everything about this

woman! He cupped the supple globes reverently, while bending forward to flick the distended dark chocolate nipples with his tongue before gently tugging each one with compressed lips. He feasted on her, knowing every swipe of the tongue, every nip of the teeth served to drive her closer to the edge. She was incredibly responsive, able to experience minor orgasms from breast play alone. He loved the way her body curved into him as she sought satisfaction, clutching his head to keep him close to her. As if he could move away!

Stephanie whimpered, arching upward. The rough feel of his flannel shirt against her bare skin heightened the myriad of sensations caused by his suckling mouth. Moisture flooded her core, making her desperate for satisfaction. She began to move her mound wantonly against the hard steel of his thighs, trying frantically to ease the delicious ache his wicked mouth, tongue and even teeth invoked in her. She felt the small quakes start deep in her body, radiating from her tormented breasts and her achy center to spread throughout her body. She gasped as she rode the tiny tremors while his questing mouth traveled down her torso, teasing her belly button before moving down to where she needed him desperately. She loved the sensation of his large, calloused hands moving up her thighs as he pushed her skirt to pool around her waist, his lip trailing not far behind leaving a trail of burning desire wherever they touched. She was thrashing mindlessly before she felt that first, magnificent sweep of his iniquitous tongue

across her outer lips.

“Ummm, now that’s sweet,” Cory muttered against her folds.

Stephanie could do little more than pant in reply. His fingers had moved to spread her completely open for his appraisal.

“And pretty too.”

She sucked in a harsh breath as he blew across her sensitized nubbin, sucking in into his mouth, sending her hurtling over the edge once more.

“Please, Cory! I need you,” she pleaded, but to no avail.

Cory feasted, voraciously probing, swiping, and suckling. He drove her over the edge over and over again until she felt she would pass out. She was begging openly by the time he moved up her body once more. Stephanie noticed vaguely his shirt had disappeared, exposing every spectacular inch of his golden chiseled body for her delight. His jeans had been pushed down just enough to expose every glorious inch of his now weeping erection. She spread her legs wide in open invitation, arching her body upwards to meet his downward thrust. Her legs immediately wrapped themselves around buttocks, urging him deeper with every lunge while canting her hips to meet him thrust for thrust.

“Oh, baby, you feel so good,” Cory rasped in her ear, trying with all that was in him to pace his propulsion. “So tight, so wet. I love the way you hold me inside you. I love everything about you.”

His words were a like a balm to her wounded soul. He never failed to make her feel like a coveted precious jewel. Pulling his head down toward her, she answered in the only way she could. Their lips met in a clash; each ravenous for the very taste of the other. Stephanie opened her lips to welcome his marauding tongue, stroking her mouth as his member stroked the flames in her rapacious core.

“Oh, God, Cory, I love you so much,” she wailed as they broke apart panting for air, the pleasure was so intense it was almost painful.

“I love you too, baby,” Cory assured her. “Always.”

He felt her walls spasm around him, gripping his member in an excruciating, throbbing caress and lost all ability to speak. He tried to hold back, to make it last for just a little longer. But when Stephanie bit down on his shoulder, her body seizing, clamping impossibly tighter against him while her tight little channel flooded with her own release, he exploded with a hoarse cry.

They lay in silence locked together, neither wanting to leave the cocoon they had created. Cory shifted, pulling Stephanie with him so that they were lying side by side, yet still connected in the most elemental way. Neither noticed the figure that slithered from the closet until he was standing directly over the bed.

“Well, that was entertaining.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Stephanie felt the blood freeze in her veins. Screwing her eyes tightly shut, she tried to will the detestable sound of that voice away. *It's not him, he can't be here. Not now. Please, God, oh please let it be a trick of my imagination.* Even as she prayed she felt the unmistakable icy touch of cold steel against her temple. She felt the sudden tension in Cory's body, though he made no attempt to move. She realized dimly one of his hands had moved to smooth down her skirt while the other still held her closely against his chest. Opening her eyes slowly she saw her worst nightmare come to life. Ramon stood by the bed, holding a gun in each hand. One was pointed directly at her temple, the other at Cory's.

"Get up, whore!" Ramon barked, venom spilling from every pore of his body.

Stephanie made a move to disentangle from Cory's arms, only to feel his arms tighten around her. Her eyes flew to his in confusion. Cory was unarmed, she knew that. When he had seen how uneasy weapons of any kind made her, he had taken his collection of guns and knives out of what was now their bedroom. She had no idea where he had put them, but she knew without a doubt they were not here. Holding her captive with his eyes, Cory slowly moved his arms from around her to refasten her bra and button her shirt. He gradually slid out of her, making

sure her skirt covered her as he glided out. Stephanie felt tears gather by the simple act. It was such a small thing that meant so much; a simple show of respect in face of the horror they were facing. It was a subtle lesson to the madman that stood beside their bed now, one Ramon could not help but notice.

“I’ve seen it all before, cowboy,” Ramon sneered down at them both. “Now get your asses up and get your hick ass away from my woman.”

Cory clinched his jaw tightly shut. *My woman!* his heart and soul bellowed in silence. It would be foolish to provoke the other man. It was obvious Ramon was walking a fine line between sanity and a complete mental break. He would be damned if he would do or say anything to push this guy over the edge. There was no way in hell he was leaving Booker Ranch with Stephanie or R.J., but Cory had to bide his time. A mistake would cost a price he was not willing to pay.

“Come with me, Stephanie,” Ramon demanded, keeping his eyes and one of his guns trained on the tall, dangerous looking man at her side.

His head was pounding against his skull, making it difficult to think. His Stephanie didn’t really like sex. She wouldn’t have willingly spread her legs for some cowboy hick, would she? But she ran from him. She had run right to this

backwater country boy! Didn't she know she belonged to him? She would have to be punished and reminded where she belonged. He had groomed her, fashioned her to be exactly what he wanted. How dare she think she could walk away from him?

"Please, Ramon," Stephanie begged as she walked slowly towards him.

"Please put the gun down. I am here. You found me."

"Shut up!" he screamed at her, not really wanting her to shut up at all. He loved the way Stephanie begged. The beauty of the tears that ran down her face only added to the perfection of her pleas. She didn't bawl like some women. Her nose didn't run or get all red. Her lovely eyes just welled with tears that flowed like a river down her face in silence, her voice a symphony of pain and fear.

"Please, Ramon," Stephanie continued. "Let him go. You have me."

As soon as she got within striking distance, Ramon grabbed her roughly, pulling her tractable body tightly against him. He took the fact she had not struggled to mean she understood that she belonged to him. Still, he snaked one arm around her chest, holding one gun directly under her chin while the other still pointed directly at the cowboy.

Until that very moment, Ramon had every intention of killing the stupid hick who dared to touch what was his. The look on the other man's face as he held the gun on Stephanie was exquisite in its pain and torment. The stupid hillbilly

was in love! It would torture the ignorant hick to know he would never again be able to sink himself in the heaven found between Stephanie's sweet thighs. Oh, it was too rich! He could taunt the man for years, sending him pictures and videos of every deviant thing he could think to make Stephanie do. He felt himself harden imagining the look of anguish that the hick would wear from here to eternity.

"Stay right there, cowboy," Ramon sneered backing away slowly. "If you try to follow me and my lady here, I'll put a bullet through her brain."

He wouldn't of course. Stephanie was no good to him dead. She was his perfect living doll. He just had to make sure she understood that.

Stephanie moved with Ramon, terrified, but relieved at the same time. He wouldn't kill Cory. She knew how twisted Ramon could get sometimes. Whatever he had seen in Cory's eyes had convinced Ramon it would be more fun to play with the other man. She couldn't look towards Cory now; she had to be strong. Though nothing could stop the flow of tears that ran down her face, she had managed not to give Ramon the satisfaction of falling completely apart. He loved to make her do that. Then he would gather her close in his loathsome arms in a perverse parody of offering comfort.

At least Ramon had not mentioned R.J. She knew he had forgotten about his own son. He wouldn't remember for days. When he did, he would no doubt beat her senseless, but at least R.J. would be safe. Cory would make sure her little boy grew up safe and free if he couldn't save her; there was no doubt in her mind Cory would do anything in his power to try to. She had no idea what would happen, but she had complete faith in the man she had given her heart to.

But she also knew Ramon. He would not leave the ranch alive without her. If leaving with Ramon could ensure her son and the man she loved would live, then she would do that. She had to be strong for all of them. Knowing beyond a doubt that Cory loved her, really loved her, was enough to get her through anything.

Cory watched with a cold detachment he never knew he had. Every fiber of his being was focused on one thing, Ramon Delgado. He was aware of every move the man took, even when he had disappeared through the bedroom door. He listened to the man's raspy breaths as he dragged Stephanie downstairs then out the back door in the kitchen. Only then did he move.

Springing into action, he paused only to grab his cell phone as he slipped silently after the man he was going to have to kill. Flipping open the phone with

one hand, he didn't pause as he called Red.

"Where are you?" Cory asked. If Red was too far away, he was going to have to sprint to the stables, the opposite direction of the west fence line. It had tall bushes and shrubs which obscured the view of the fence from the main house. It was a perfect place to hide a vehicle; he had no doubt that was where Ramon was taking Stephanie.

"The barn," Red answered promptly. "Found a van by the west gate. Disabled it and set Smoky to watch it while I came back here to have a look around."

"Have Max waiting by the side door," Cory told the older man, ending the call and putting his cell on silent before stuffing it the front pocket of his jeans.

He didn't make a sound as he went straight to his study to collect his Winchester, loading it with 30/30 rounds before slipping out the side door. Red was waiting for him with Cory's large chestnut Quarter horse, Max. There was no saddle, but then Cory didn't need one. The older man tossed Cory the reigns as the young man vaulted onto the back of the horse, then mounted the spotted Appaloosa he had brought for himself. The west gate was about two miles from the house and Ramon had a fifteen-minute head start. The man was dragging Stephanie in front of him, walking backward the whole way no doubt. Like that would keep Cory from killing him. Nothing in earth could save Ramon now.

Ramon had entered *his* bedroom and took *his* woman at gunpoint. The only question was whether Cory would take a kill shot or let the man suffer, slowly bleeding out his life on the cold ground.

As soon as he rounded the corner of the house, Cory caught sight of his prey. As he suspected, Ramon was dragging Stephanie in front of him as Cory had suspected. One of the guns he had previously held was nowhere in sight, probably because Stephanie was not making it easy on him. Cory felt his chest swell with pride as he watched his woman drag her feet, pretending to stumble to slow Ramon down even more. He would tan her hide over the risk she was taking later, but he was still proud of her. She knew he was coming, she believed in him. That was enough to humble any man.

Letting go of the reigns, Cory brought the Winchester up to aim for his shot.

"I'll shoot her!" Ramon screamed holding her as a shield. "I'll kill her if you don't get back!"

Cory waited patiently until Ramon made the mistake he knew he would make. Barreling towards the crazed man, Cory aimed carefully. When Ramon swung the gun wildly to take a shot at him, Cory squeezed the trigger, taking out a knee that Ramon had failed to keep behind Stephanie. Ramon fell to the ground just as Cory thundered past him, swooping to the side to grab Stephanie before she could fall with her captor.

Swinging the horse around, Cory took a one armed shot directly at Ramon's stomach while riding past him back towards the house.

"Call the sheriff," Cory threw over his shoulder at Red, who had stopped and stood over the bleeding man writhing in agony on the ground.

EPILOGUE

Stephanie sighed contently as rubbed her rapidly increasing belly. It was hard to believe for a year she had been Mrs. Cory Booker. She as she watched her father-in-law teach R.J. how to throw a lasso. In four short months, there would be a little cowgirl in the family.

“Hey, baby. How’s both my girls?”

Stephanie smiled as her husband eased behind her in the double seated rocking chair. “We’ve never been better.”

It was true. Ramon was dead; Cory’s shot that landed in Ramon’s stomach had killed him slowly. By the time the ambulance arrived, it had already been too late. R.J. had never known anything was wrong. He and Dwayne had been happily ensconced in the den. When Dwayne had heard the unmistakable retort from the shotgun, he had distracted the little boy, putting on his favorite movie, Posse. Funny, R.J. never even asked about his father. Since Ramon was dead, Cory was able to adopt R.J. outright. He was now officially Ray Booker, though they still called him R.J.

“What are you thinking about?” Cory asked her, placing his hands over hers.

“Oh, I was just thinking about how much I love you,” she told him. “I don’t

know what I would do without you.”

Cory hugged her tightly. “You will never have to find out,” he assured her.
“I’m keeping you forever.”

The End

A little bit about the author:

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I am a graduate of Trinity University with a B.S. in Business Administration, served in the Navy for four of the most interesting years of my life, and once got arrested in Mexico (wouldn't you love to know why?). I have traveled extensively. My favorite destination is of course Paris, followed by Bahrain, Hong Kong and Sicily. I fell in love with romance after reading *The Flame and the Flower* at age 13. My first attempt at romance was three binders of an ongoing saga of Duran Duran, specifically John, Simon and Roger and myself. I decided to become a writer after I got busted with said notebook, and grounded for the explicit sexual content. My parents wouldn't believe I had actually never had sex, just read about it. I figured it must have been partly believable. I married a cowboy from Illinois and have two of the most intelligent, gorgeous children in the world. I met my husband in Japan, we had our first date in Hawaii, and got married in San Diego. I have lived in Southern California, Chicago, and Sicily and currently reside in the South. I love to hear from fans, so feel free to email.

Peace and Love,

Shara

Books out by Shara:

Red Rose Publishing:

My Cherie Amour

Anchors Away Series: Coming soon

Cacoethes Publishing

Thierry's Angel

Coming soon to a publisher near you:

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